

ED333951 1991-03-00 The Community College Role in Achieving Adult Literacy. ERIC Digest.

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In February 1990, President Bush and the nation's governors adopted new goals for education, including the goal that:

"By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate

and will possess the skills necessary to compete in a global economy and to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship."

Within the overall national goal, five specific subgoals address various forms and directions for adult literacy: strengthening the connections between education and work; educating workers to adapt to changing technologies, work methods, and markets; providing educational opportunities for part-time and mid-career students; increasing the number of minority students who successfully complete college programs; and increasing the proportion of college graduates who can think critically, communicate effectively, and solve problems in the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities.

During the past two decades, community colleges have played a significant role in the promotion of adult literacy both on their campuses and within their communities. Each of the national subgoals corresponds to an important part of the community college mission.

In a number of areas, community college services and resources are a precise fit with the needs of adult literacy training. "Some observers believe that community colleges are the best bet for long-term growth of the basic skills field, because those institutions already have a diversity of resources, a long track record of working with business and government on training issues, and usually, strong support from state and local governments. They also allow the learner to avoid the stigma of 'going back to school' and provide a ready vehicle for transition from basic skills training to training and certification in specialized fields." (Chisman, 1989, p. 12) The following are a sample of reports on the ways that community colleges are involved in literacy services.

COLLEGE LITERACY PROGRAMS

The Maricopa Community College District in Phoenix, Arizona, has adopted a coordinative approach to literacy education (Stevens and Piland, 1987). The district has initiated a joint effort with a volunteer committee of the Public Relations Society of America, the Arizona Department of Education, and the Literacy Volunteers of Maricopa County. Volunteers teach functionally illiterate adults to read and write at no charge, and offer an 18-hour training workshop for individual tutors. The Maricopa District has organized a volunteer recruitment drive among students and faculty to address the program's two major problems: too few volunteers and not enough money. Project LIFE at South Plains College in Lubbock, Texas also involves a coalition of community agencies (South Plains College, 1988). The project's objectives are to increase public awareness of the complexities and problems of adult illiteracy, while promoting literacy as a value within the community. Combining the resources of the major literacy providers in the area, Project LIFE provides literacy training and

prevocational workshops to enhance employability and career adaptability.

The direct provision of instruction in reading and writing is not the only way that community colleges are involved in literacy development. Other activities, many of which relate to the national goals and subgoals, include the following.

Coordination of Activities. The delivery of literacy services is a multifaceted effort, including "public school systems, community organizations, storefront operations, corporate training classes, proprietary institutions, volunteer tutoring programs and every possible variation of these and other service-delivery modes." (Chisman, 1989, p. 12) Some feel that the most appropriate role for community colleges is serving as a "nexus" or connecting agency, working with these groups to develop broad-based community-wide efforts (Stevens and Piland, 1987).

Tutor and Instructor Training. Most of the teaching force in the field of adult literacy training is comprised of volunteers and K-12 teachers working part-time. For the most part, the school teachers have received little training in appropriate pedagogies for adult students and the volunteers have received little training at all.

The Literacy Education Action (LEA) program at El Paso Community College began as an independent program and has since evolved into a network of community literacy groups (Clymer, 1989). LEA recruits and trains volunteer tutors and uses a language experience approach to provide assistance to native English speakers, Spanish-speakers, and bilingual students.

Post-Literacy. Most community college literacy services are not designed for adults reading at the lowest levels. Instead they focus on raising students' skill levels to the point at which they can obtain a GED certificate or enter college-level courses. Depending on students' skill levels at entry, progress can take hundreds of hours of instruction and practice (Mikulecky, 1990).

During this period, community colleges must bring all of their expertise in remedial instruction and student retention to bear on ensuring steady progress and forestalling student frustration and withdrawal. Chisman (1989, p. 15) advocates an adult literacy delivery system "that will accept any adult at any level of skills and move him or her along a continuum to at least the level of basic skills required to function effectively on the job and in everyday life, today and in the decades to come."

Services for Learning Disabled Students. A study by Keefe and Meyer (1988) of adults in basic education programs found that more than 75% of those adults reading below the level of the average 8-year-old have diagnosed learning disabilities and close to 90% have uncorrectable vision problems. Existing community college programs for LD students can accommodate many adults who have obtained some measure of literacy through other venues, as well as providing diagnostic testing.

Workplace Literacy. Several of the national literacy goals focus on technological literacy and workforce productivity. Community colleges have long been involved in providing customized job training for local businesses. Many colleges and businesses are building upon these contacts so that basic skills training for workers may be provided by community colleges on a contract basis. (Chisman, 1988).

Computer-Assisted Instruction. Computers are pervasive throughout the educational system, and certainly within community colleges. According to Askov and Clark (1991) computers have the following advantages for adult literacy instruction: privacy, individualization, better than average achievement gains, cost-effectiveness, student control of learning, flexibility in scheduling, open-entry/open-exit operations, and transferability of familiarity with computers into various work settings. Many of the disadvantages noted by Askov and Clark, such as lack of staff expertise and training, are not applicable to community colleges which tend to have prior experience with this form of instruction.

The Center for Advancing Technology at Piedmont Community College in North Carolina has developed a computer-based model for rural, adult education (Bailey and Rentz, 1989). The Center has established an adult computer lab, offering orientation, instruction, drilling, testing, and learning styles surveys.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

The field of adult literacy has been negatively affected by the lack of meaningful program evaluations at state, institutional and program levels. As Chisman notes, "the lack of adequate measurement tools also means that we have only very crude ways to assess the abilities or progress of individual learners, to evaluate the effectiveness of programs, or to measure the progress of the nation as a whole toward national goals." Padak and Padak (1991, p. 374) cite three recent surveys which indicate that "evaluations are either seldom undertaken or are reported in ways that make meaningful interpretation difficult." Community colleges can make a major contribution to the field of adult literacy by conducting program evaluations that will answer important questions about program participants, such as the length of time they persist, the amount of in-class and out-of-class time they devote to learning, and the number of people who are actually learning according to specific attainable measures. Padak and Padak's model for program evaluation includes variables related to the personal and academic growth of program participants and the value added to the quality of their lives. The model also identifies program characteristics to be considered in the evaluation, including personnel qualifications, collaborative networks, student-teacher relations, and program content. The remaining components of the model relate to external factors, such as financial gains afforded participants, returns on investment, and rate of participation.

CONCLUSION

Community colleges are in an ideal position to play a significant role in combating the nation's literacy problem. To do so, however, will require additional leadership and funding from state and federal sources; the recruitment and training of faculty to work with students reading below the fifth-grade level; the provision of transportation, child care, textbooks, and other services to overcome the barriers to education faced by many illiterate adults; and a more flexible manner of delivering instruction that allows students to progress at their own pace (Stevens and Piland, 1987). Even without meeting all of these conditions, community colleges can have an impact on literacy in their communities by joining forces with other agencies, institutions, and groups.

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